

Originally published Sunday, 23 December 2007 in the magazine American Samurai

American Samurai



The Complete Martial Artist

By Roger Jarrett

In the modern martial arts world, it is almost impossible to survive without some amount of cross training in more than one system. Unfortunately, over the years many martial arts instructors have encouraged their students to only train in one style...theirs! These instructors would try to convince their students that the style they taught was the only style they needed because it contained everything, or at least, everything they thought was important. The point is every style of martial arts has its strengths and its weaknesses. No one style or teacher is the best nor has all the answers.

In my opinion, to be a well rounded martial artist, a person should train in striking arts, grappling and joint control arts, throwing arts, and weaponry. Each system must be studied as a pure art in order to understand the technique and science of each style. Just taking a couple of seminars in Jujitsu will not make you a grappler. Watching a video on Aikido will not make you a joint control technician. Nor will reading a book on Okinawan Kobudo (buki waza) make you a weapons expert.

Too often I have hear a Karate or Tae Kwon Do black belt claim they do not have to worry about grappling techniques because their kicks and punches will stop the judo man before he gets close enough. I have also heard the grappler that doesn't need kicks and punches because he'll simply take his opponent to the ground. Both of these have been proven wrong time and time again.

I love to spar with a top Karate champion in the dojo and proceed to throw, choke, pin, or put them in a lock, while they are lost or simply hoping a referee will stop the match so they can stand up and start again. Also, sparring with a grappler that wants to go immediately to the ground. I like to punch and strike them as I twist out of the hold and then stand and kick him while he sits on the ground not understanding why I didn't want to stay on the mat and play "tap out".

Joint Locking and Throwing

I have often watched a great Karate master teach a wonderful kata, then proceed to teach the bunkai, which contains joint locks and throws, with about a green belt level of skill and understanding of the techniques. On the same page, I have seen great Karate masters teach superb throws and locks, usually because they have also had extensive Judo or Aikido training and many times hold dan rank in one or both.

I remember one time watching a video of a Karate instructor from England teaching self-defense. He proceeded to show many applications using a variety of basic Karate blocks and strikes. At the end of the tape, he went into a demonstration of joint locks, which he then claimed were ineffective in a real situation. My students and I could hardly contain our laughter. The techniques did not work because they were incorrect. He obviously knew nothing about Aikido. Almost all police defensive tactics programs across the world are based on Aikido/Jujitsu techniques. The famous Japanese Riot Police are required to go through an extensive Yoshinkan Aikido course and test for Shodan.

On the other hand, I can remember some of my early exposure to Aikido. I was a young teenage Nidan in Tae Kwon Do and Karate as well as a Nidan in Judo. I had also been studying Hapkido. I had seen a demonstration of Aikido and decided to give it a try. My first Aikido teacher was Fumio Toyoda Sensei. He was a powerful, stocky man and a very skilled Godan. During one of my earlier classes, Sensei decided that he would show how Aikido worked against kicks. Since I was a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, I was chosen to attack Toyoda Sensei. He simply said to kick him. So I did. Across the dojo.

At the time, I was a young competitor and my lead foot step sidekick was one of my fastest and most powerful techniques. When I saw Sensei go flying across the mat, I knew that I had made a bad choice of kicks. He was probably expecting a basic rear leg front kick. Of course, I did pay for that kicking mistake many times over through the years, as I became one of sensei's favorite ukes. Toyoda Sensei had me teach the Aikido students how to kick and punch so their attacks would be strong and correct. Sensei also became very good at avoiding my kicks and throwing me to the mat. It was a priceless exchange of energy. Today, one of my most popular seminars I give for Aikido programs is how to defend against Karate and Judo attacks using Aikido.

Even in today's modern sport Karate, with the new rules of the World Karate Federation, cross training is becoming essential. High, dynamic kicks and fast, powerful throws have become crowd pleasing, high scoring techniques. In my early days of competing in sport Karate, my kicks got me in more trouble than they scored points. Recently, my two children, who are black belts, were watching an old film of me competing in an AAU event. I bounced around the ring, shifting from stance to stance, throwing nothing but reverse punches (I won that match by the way). My children were puzzled and wanted to know why I didn't kick. I explained that the referee was a high-ranking Karate sensei, and if I threw my kick he would simply call it a push, even if my opponent had to stop and recuperate. Things have changed somewhat now, and the kicks score higher than then punches, forcing many Karate practitioners to study Tae Kwon Do style kicking. Karate competitors are studying more Judo to help understand how to sweep and throw as well as learning proper ukemi to fall safely.

I remember when the new rules first came out. I had to spend many sessions explaining and translating the Judo throws in the new rules that were legal and those that were illegal. Some of the referees still don't understand, including some that wrote the rules. But they are getting better and so is the sport.

Weapons Training

Many martial artists neither like, nor wish to learn weapons. This is their loss. Whether it's working with a traditional bo, nunchaku, or tonfa, or even a .357 Magnum, understanding weapons is an important part of self-defense. Traditional buki waza serve as an important extension of our overall martial arts training. It develops the mind and body in a way that allows you to pick up any item and turn it into a weapon. In addition, in order to defend against a weapon, it is best to know how to use it properly.

One time, I was coaxed into an Arnis seminar that a famous female martial arts was conducting. I had studied Arnis before, and had very much enjoyed the training. During this seminar, our instructor was moving very fast and smooth through many techniques. She then decided to show some locks and pressure points as well. She should have stuck to the strikes. She quickly went back to the strikes when she realized she had overstepped her skill. What happened next goes back to the weapons training. She was teaching a particular high block with her stick, but became frustrated when her partners would not attack her with enough force to show the effectiveness of the block. She asked for someone that would attack with more power. I reluctantly volunteered. She took her stance and was ready to receive my attack. I attacked with a hard downward strike to the head. As she blocked, my strike penetrated and broke her stick. I apologized, but she insisted trying again with a new one. I broke that one too. The point is that the others were attacking with quick snappy taps, but because of my sword training, my downward cut was more powerful and focused. I have spent many hours cutting down with a bokken or katana. Thank you Toyoda Sensei and Yamazaki Sensei.

What I am trying to get across is that training in more than one martial art should be the norm, and not the exception. Even the masters of old trained with many different teachers. You may not have the time or the interest to train in more than one style, and that is ok. Just don't wear blinders. Be able to see clearly the world around you. Understand your strengths and weaknesses. This is American, and you are American Samurai. Have fun!